

# House panel adopts guides

ADV JAN 20 2011

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A state House panel on Wednesday adopted rules that will guide its work redrawing legislative, congressional and other election district lines during a special legislative session this spring.

The Louisiana House and Governmental Affairs Committee, among other things, said it will not consider submitted plans that address only regional or local changes.

"The committee cannot consider how to draw District X in a vacuum but how District X fits into districts around it and the whole state," said House Clerk Butch Speer.

"We expect especially outside, well-funded groups to assign all the geography and people in a plan," said Speer.

The "whole" plan provision brought criticism from state Rep. Rosalind Jones, D-Monroe, who feared the rule would serve as a barrier for constituent input.

"To say from the outset we will not consider anything but a whole plan is a barrier be-

cause they (constituents) don't have the money and means to produce it," Jones said.

But the committee's senior analyst Patricia Lowrey said the rule does not hamper input from individuals or groups — all of which will be considered.

"It does not preclude anyone from coming to you in any venue saying this is what we would like to see in our area, this is what we would like to see in our neighborhood," said Lowrey.

Jones tried to strip the "whole plan" provision, but the committee rejected it on a 2 for and 16 against vote.

The committee adopted rules as it prepared to get specific census data required to redraw election districts based on the required one-man, one-vote principle so there is equal representation. That information is scheduled to arrive either Feb 2 or Feb. 3.

The data will be analyzed to see how much legislative districts must shrink or grow in geographical size based on population shifts since the

2000 census.

The House committee will travel the state between Feb. 17 and March 1 conducting public hearings in nine different cities as it seeks input on local and area preferences for district changes.

Committee chairman Rep. Rick Gallot, D-Ruston, encouraged constituent participation in all sessions and said the committee needs to stress that "their voices do matter."

"This is a representative democracy," Gallot said.

A special legislative session opens March 20 dedicated to redistricting of legislative, congressional, Public Service Commission, Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and Louisiana Supreme Court district lines.

With legislative approval, the plans must go to the U.S. Justice Department for approval to ensure the voting rights of all residents are protected.

Timely approval is particularly important for legislative and BESE elections which occur this fall.